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SURGE IS REPORTED IN ESPIONAGE CASES

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WASHINGTON, June 1 — Never before have so many people been awaiting trial on charges of espionage against the United States, Federal officials say.

Around the country, 11 people are accused of spying for the Soviet Union or its allies. Three of those people are members of the Walker family, charged last month in what some Federal officials call the most damaging spy case in recent times.

Federal Bureau of Investigation figures show that in the last four years, 11 other people have been charged with espionage and convicted. There were 46 people convicted of espionage or related crimes over the previous 40 years.

4 Million See 'Secret' Data

Federal officials say part of the reason for this sharp rise is increased enforcement, but intelligence officers and other Government officials also say the Soviet Union has more intelligence officers operating in the United States than ever.

Another important part of the problem, these officials said, is that the number of Americans approved to handle material classified as secret or top secret has risen beyond four million.

An official of the National Security Council said the Government estimates "there are approximately one-third more Soviet intelligence officers here now" than a decade ago. A senior intelligence official put the number at almost 1,000.

The Senate Select Committee on Intelligence concluded in a report last week that one-quarter of the 800 Russians assigned to the United Nations are "intelligence officers," and that many more are "co-opted" by the K.G.B. or other Soviet intelligence agencies.

Meanwhile, the number of Americans with access to secret and top secret material has grown by more than 50 percent in the last 10 years, while the number of classifed documents has grown dramatically, too. As of April 1, Defense Department statistics show, 4.3 million people had official Government clearance to handle materials in restricted categories.

More than 600,000 people in Government and in private industry may review top secret material, the most sensitive classification. More than 100,000 people are cleared to handle "sensitive compartmented information," a catagory of the most highly classified intelligence information.

Britt L. Snider, the Defense Department's Director of Counterintelligence and Security Policy, said, "The requests for clearances have been increasing like crazy the last couple of years."

Clearance Requests Doubled

The Defense Department processed 136,920 requests for security clearance in 1975. In 1984 there were 206,790, an increase of 50 percent. And with more than four million people now approved to handle secret and top secret documents, Mr. Snider added, "it does suggest that we have a greater vulnerability" to Soviet spies.

With the arrest of the three Walkers, members of Congress and others are focusing on these facts with renewed concern. John A. Walker Jr., his son Michael and his brother Arthur all had secret or top secret security clearances while serving in the Navy or afterward. All are accused of selling the Russians a wide range of highly sensitive naval information.

Nunn Asks Big Reduction

On Friday Senator Sam Nunn of Georgia, the senior Democrat on the Armed Services Committee, said the United States should halve the number of people approved to handle classifie material. Also this week Patrick J. Leahy, the Vermont Democrat who is vice chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, said, "Soviet spying is a far greater problem today than we have acknowledged."

A senior intelligence official said Soviet intelligence officers work "in the Soviet Embassy, in the consulates, at the U.N."

"They work for Tass," the Soviet Government press agency, he added, for Aeroflot, the Soviet airline, "other businesses and under deep cover" not attached to a business or government office.

He and other intelligence officials said the estimate of almost 1,000 Soviet officers did not tell the entire story.

"It doesn't take into account the visiting delegations, the travelers and the co-opted people," said James J. Angleton, who was the Central Intelligence Agency's counterintelligence director until 1975.

Roy Godson, a professor at Georgetown University who teaches and writes about intelligence matters and serves as a consultant to the Government, said he had been told by several knowledgeable Russians that "Soviet citizens who visit the United States have to sign a paper saying they will serve their Government if asked." He added that this did not necessarily mean all the visitors were asked to serve as spies.

"But when they need someone to serve as a drop" or as a courier, Professor Godson said, "they might use one of these people. That complicates counterintelligence for us tremendously because we don't have enough resources to watch all of them."

Most of the Soviet intelligence officials work as case officers, United States officials said. That means they may do little spying themselves, but they manage Americans who have access to sensitive material and are being paid or otherwise influenced to work for the Russians.

John Walker is accused of working as an agent for a Soviet case officer identified in a Government affidavit as a vice consul at the Soviet Embassy here. Federal officials say the Soviet officer left the country almost immediately after Mr. Walker was charged with espionage.

Intelligence officials say each Soviet case officer can probably manage no more than five American agents at a time. Directing agents is complicated and time-consuming, they say. That means, the officials went on, that the Russians could be working with as many as several hundred Americans as spies, although it is unlikely that every Soviet case officer has a full complement of American agents.

Arrests Aren't the Whole Story

Mr. Godson said: "They have a large number of people, and we don't seem to be catching very many of them, which makes us wonder: What are the others doing?"

American officials say the number of arrests does not tell the whole story since many people caught spying are never prosecuted. Every time a spy is caught, they said, the damage can be compounded if the seriousness of his disclosures becomes publicly known.

"It's one thing for the Soviets to get our secrets," an intelligence official said, "but it's even worse when they can find out from us exactly how valuable what they got really was." So in many cases, he and other officials said, national security dictates that the spy not be put to a public trial.

When they can, intelligence officials

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said, they try to coerce a spy suspect to work for the United States; in essence, they try to turn him into a double agent who can then pass information back to his Soviet case officer that is mostly false. "It's a huge, messy, time-consuming business," an intelligence official said. "Some of them are hopeless, and we don't even try."

But when an American can be turned into a double agent, that has the additional advantage of tying up much of the Soviet case officer's time on a useless agent, the officials said.

Government officials and others offer a number of explanations for the apparent dramatic increase in spying in the last decade. In the détente years of the 1970's, "we opened up the country to a very substantial inflow of possible intelligence operatives," said Bobby R. Inman, former Deputy Director of Central Intelligence.

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At the same time, Mr. Inman and others added, throughout the 1970's the United States cut back the money and manpower devoted to counterintelligence because of budgetary constraints and public accusations of mismanagement and abuse in the American intelligence community.